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ABSTRACT

It was hypothesized in this study that media supporters would be more persuaded by messages delivered through media sources than would media critics. An experimental Persuasion study was conducted in which persons were asked to give their personal evaluations of news media performance. Then they were exposed to a persuasive message delivered either on film, on audio tape, or in print. One hundred ten mass communications students at the University of Wisconsin--Madison served as subjects. Media supporters are clearly more influenced by the medium used to deliver a persuasive message than are media critics. However, the prediction that media supporters would be more persuaded than media critics in general was not supported. (RB)

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Influence of Broadcast and Print Media on Media Critics and Supporters

by James L. Hoyt

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Influence of Broadcast and Print Media

on Media Critics and Supporters

A number of surveys in recent years have provided extensive data about how Americans react to and evaluate their mass media. Depending on the exact wording of the questions, the population interviewed, and the general mood of the country toward the media at the time of the survey, a variety of results has been reported.

Nevertheless, some consistencies and trends are evident, especially concerning public reaction to the news media. A Louis Harris poll, commissioned by Time magazine after former Vice President Agnew's original media attacks, found a majority of Americans believing newspapers to sometimes be unfair and biased in their coverage.[1] Only about a third of the respondents saw television news in the same way. The study did not, however, report evidence of either strong support or strong opposition directed toward the media.

A year later Newsweek sponsored and reported a similar Gallup survey.[2] It found more evidence of disagreement among Americans in reaction to their media. The study reported the majority of people thought the medium they relied on for their news was doing an "excellent" or "good" job, but that more than half the respondents also felt some points of view were not adequately being reported and could recall at least one story they felt the media treated unfairly.

This Gallup survey showed further division when respondents evaluated media performance in reporting events with which the respondents were personally familiar. Of the newspaper readers, 48% said their paper did an "excellent" or "good" job reporting the event, while 45% said the paper did a "poor" or "fair" job. Of those people who relied on television, 52% reported their medium did a good or excellent job of covering such stories, while 36% said the television coverage was poor or fair.

Evidence such as this has been cited to support frequent statements that the public is deeply divided on the issue of media performance. A national Roper survey, conducted in November, 1974, and reported in April, 1975, found 58% of its respondents rating newspaper performance as excellent or good, while 36% considered it fair or poor.[3] In the same study television fared somewhat better with the public; 71% rated television performance as excellent or good, with 25% considering it fair or poor.

And Bower, in his massive study of audience reactions to television, reported 41% of his sample agreed television "seems to be getting worse all the time," while 38% supported the statement that television "seems to be getting better all the time."[4] Faced with evidence that people tend to either strongly support or criticize television, Bower devoted a portion of his extensive analysis to these groups, creating the terms "superfans" and "villifiers" to refer to the people who feel most strongly about television.[5]

Although such data document the extreme positive and negative positions held by Americans toward their media, they do not address the obvious issue implied by their results. That is, do media critics <u>respond</u> any differently

than media supporters to the same media messages? Or, more specifically, does the medium by which a given message is communicated make any difference to media critics or supporters? The current study addressed these questions.

In an early chapter on mass media effects, Hovland cautioned that studies comparing the effects of different media should consider the various audience members' perceptions of the prestige and other aspects of the media being compared.[6] And because, according to Hovland and Janis[7] and McGuire[8] a person must first accept a persuasive communication before being persuaded by it, this acceptance quite certainly must depend on how the audience member evaluates the media generally.

Within this context a persuasion study was conducted, including as variables the medium used to communicate the persuasive message and the audience members' overall evaluations of media performance.

Whereas a variety of studies have been addressed to overall differences between various types of media presentation,[9] especially in terms of the amount of influence or information learned, the question of if media critics differ from media supporters in response to messages from different media remains unaddressed. It is apparent that audiences generally obtain more details about the source of a story reported on television, where the source can be both seen and heard, than when the story is reported on radio, where the source is only heard. Likewise the audience learns more about the source of the story from radio than when the story appears in print, where the source can be neither seen nor heard. The broadcast media, especially television, thus have more of what Hsia refers to as dimensionality.[10]

Clear-cut predictions are difficult to make for the current study. The literature is inconclusive on the issue of one medium being more persuasive than

another. However, assuming that media supporters generally hold the media source of a persuasive message in higher esteem and assign higher credibility to the source, we predicted that the supporters would be more persuaded by messages delivered through media sources than would media critics. More specifically, we predicted that media supporters, because of the higher credibility they place in media sources, would be more sensitive to variations in media than would media critics. If this were, in fact, the case, we expected supporters to be most highly influenced when they had maximum information about the source (source could be seen and heard) and least influenced when they had minimum information about the source (source neither seen nor heard).

Method

An experimental persuasion study was conducted in which persons were asked to give their personal evaluations of news media performance, after which they were exposed to a persuasive message delivered either (a) on film, (b) on audio tape, or (c) by print. Attitude change scores were then computed for all participants.

Subjects were 110 undergraduates (68 male and 42 female) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Most were sophomores and were enrolled in one of two introductory mass communications courses at the time of the study. The subjects participated in groups ranging from three to 21 in size. Twelve experimental sessions were held, and conditions were randomly assigned by session.

The groups of subjects were met by a female experimenter who first administered a mimeographed booklet which contained T_1 attitude assessment items, scales asking the subjects to evaluate news media performance in general, and a variety of personality scales used for other study purposes.

The attitude assessment items were imbedded in a longer "Mass Media Survey" developed to be congruent with the overall disguise of the study. The filler items in the survey covered a number of current issues in the mass media. Attitudes were assessed on seven-point bi-polar scales, with the extremities labelled "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." Of the 14 items on the entire survey, five constituted the critical attitude assessment measure. They were selected from a longer original list by an internal consistency item analysis which had been conducted earlier as a pre-test.

The media evaluation instructions asked the person to evaluate each of three media, (a) television, (b) radio, and (c) newspapers on five criteria: accuracy, objectivity, believability, trustworthiness, and prestige. Seven-point bi-polar scales were used, with the extremes labelled with such designations as "very accurate" and "very inaccurate," etc. By summing the various scales an overall media evaluation score was computed for each subject. The subjects were then divided, by a median split, into two categories: media supporters (those who evaluated the media most highly) and media critics (those who rated the media lowest).

After they had completed the first booklet, the subjects were given a printed sheet which contained the instructions for the rest of the experiment. The instructions said the study was attempting to obtain reactions to and

evaluations of messages "prepared by various personnel at the university for mass media distribution." The source of the message was described as "the chairman of the Current Legal Issues Research Committee of the Wisconsin Law School." The instruction sheet said that after being exposed to the message the subjects would be given another questionnaire on which to evaluate the message.

The message, which had been used in a number of previous studies, strongly advocated allowing television cameras to cover courtroom proceedings at the discretion of the judge. It was a topic which had not been covered in either of the mass communications courses the subjects were enrolled in at the time of the study. The message was composed mainly from arguments raised in the minority opinion of the U. S. Supreme Court in the 1965 case of Billie Sol Estes vs. State of Texas.

The only manipulated variable in the study was the medium used to transmit the message. The three vehicles used to approximate the three media of interest were (a) a sound, color film to approximate television, (b) an audio tape recording to approximate radio, and (c) a mimeographed news release as a print message. The audio tape was made from the sound track of the film, thus both were about six minutes long. The print version was labelled a news release coming from the University of Wisconsin News Service. It was a two-page mimeographed verbatim transcript of the same message.

After being exposed to the message the subjects were given a second booklet, this one containing a number of message evaluation items plus the

same five attitude assessment items from the first booklet. The message evaluation questions asked the respondents to judge how helpful, clear, logical, informational, and beneficial they considered the message. These questions were included to lend credibility to the study's disguise and to provide evidence of the subjects' perceptions of the quality of the message in the various conditions.

In the second booklet there was no attempt to disguise the attitude items. They appeared alone on a page with the instructions: "Now that you have been exposed to the message, please respond to these items again." To obtain attitude change scores for the subjects, the summed T_1 attitude scores were subtracted from the summed T_2 attitude scores for each subject.

Results

The study used a 2 x 3 factorial design with two levels of the media evaluation variable designated (a) media supporters and (b) media critics; and three levels of the media variable being (a) film, (b) audio tape, and (c) print.

Media Evaluation. The maximum range for the media evaluation scores was from a low of 15 (lowest score for each of the three media on all five characteristics) to a high of 105 (highest score for each). Actual scores ranged from 36 to 89, with a mean of 65.5. By considering those subjects with scores of 65 and below to be "media critics" and those with scores of 66 and above to be "media supporters," we had 54 critics and 56 supporters in the total sample of 110.

Attitude Change. The unequal n analysis of variance revealed no attitude change main effects for either of the two variables, however it did indicate a significant interaction between the media evaluation variable and the medium used to present the message ($F=4.57, df=2/104, p<.025$). The pattern of the interaction (Figure 1) was such that the medium used

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Figure 1 about here

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made little difference in attitude change for the media critics, but made a dramatic difference for media supporters. The difference was in the predicted direction, with the film message being more persuasive than the audio message, which, in turn, was more persuasive than the print message.

Message Evaluations. As with the attitude change dependent variable, the analysis of variance using the total message evaluation dependent variable found no main effects for either independent variable, but did reveal a significant interaction between them ($F=4.79, df=2/104, p<.025$). The interaction (Figure 2) was such that the media critics rated the message lowest when it

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Figure 2 about here

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was delivered on film and the media supporters rated the message highest when

it was on film. In neither case was there any difference between the message evaluations when the message was communicated by audio tape or in print.

Discussion

Media supporters are clearly more influenced by the medium used to deliver a persuasive message than are media critics. Whereas the medium makes little or no difference to media critics, it makes a striking difference to media supporters. In the present study media supporters were far more influenced by the message when it was seen on film than when heard on tape, and more influenced by the tape than by a print version of the same message. At the same time our prediction that media supporters would be more persuaded than media critics in general was not supported.

What do these findings mean to media practitioners and to our theoretical understanding of these media processes? For one thing, the data show that media support/criticism is a characteristic with broader implications than its face definition. That is, media supporters appear to be quite sensitive to and affected by the medium through which they receive a message, whereas media critics are relatively uninfluenced by that variation. This effect shows up not only for changes in attitudes but also in terms of the subjects' evaluations of the messages they received. Supporters thought the film version was best, critics thought it was worst.

This evidence suggests a further look at who the media supporters and critics are in society. Because subjects in the present study were all

college students such data were not available, however some related findings have been reported by Bower. Because media supporters were more dramatically affected by the media manipulations than the critics in the present study we're especially interested in looking more closely at them. Bower, in analyzing his so-called television "superfans," reports that 33% of his respondents with a grade school education gave the most extreme positive response possible to a question calling television "wonderful." This compared to 19% of the respondents with a high school education and 7% of those who had been to college.[11] This evidence then suggests the more education one has the less likely that person is to be a strong media supporter.

At the same time the data from the present study also indicate that media supporters are quite sophisticated in their responses to messages from different media. Along with Bower's evidence that people with less education tend to be stronger media supporters, he also presented data to indicate that people with less education also spend more time with television than do those with more education. For example, 40% of the white respondents with a grade school education were labelled "heavy" viewers, compared to 29% of those with at least some college.[12]

The implications of the present findings for broadcast journalists are also apparent. The results, combined with an earlier study by Seasonwein and Sussman,[13] point to the obvious conclusion that it is in the best interests of a newsmaker with a persuasive appeal to the public to be both seen and heard by the public. In deciding whether to use film of that newsmaker or to cover the story in another visual manner, the journalist should be aware

that he or she is controlling a major variable potentially affecting the response by the public to that story. Thus newsroom policies specifying when sound film or videotape of newsmakers should be used become quite critical.

It is interesting to note that the message evaluation interaction in part helps to explain the attitude change interaction. That is, media critics actually thought the message was weakest when presented on film and the supporters thought it was strongest when on film. Apparently supporters were doubly affected by the media variation. Not only were they more persuaded by the message when the source could be both seen and heard, but they also rated the message as being best in that film condition. Thus strong audience support for a particular message seems to go along with that message also being effective as a persuader.

So if you're out to persuade media critics it doesn't make much difference which medium you use to distribute your message. But film appears to be more successful than radio and radio more effective than print for persuading media supporters. If, as will most likely be the case, you don't know the make-up of your audience in terms of media support/criticism, the current results would lean toward recommending the use of television or film, so the source could be both seen and heard.

One final caution: the major findings of the present study have been demonstrated using only one message and one rather selective sample of college students. The implications of these findings can only become broader if these findings are replicated in future research using a wider range of messages and audiences.

FOOTNOTES

1 "Judging the Fourth Estate: A Time-Louis Harris Poll," Time (September 5, 1969), pp. 38-39.

2 "The People and the Press: A Newsweek Poll Explores U.S. Attitudes on the Media," Newsweek (November 9, 1970), pp. 22-25.

3 Burns W. Roper, Trends in Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media 1959-1974 (New York: Television Information Office, 1975), pp. 11-12.

4 Robert T. Bower, Television and the Public (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1973), Ch. 2.

5 Ibid., pp. 24-27.

6 Carl I. Hovland, "Effects of the Mass Media of Communication," in Gardner Lindzey (Ed.), Handbook of Social Psychology (Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Co., 1954), pp. 1062-1103.

7 Carl I. Hovland and Irving L. Janis (Eds.), Personality and Persuasibility (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959).

8 William J. McGuire, "Personality and Susceptibility to Social Influence," in Edgar F. Borgatta and William W. Lambert (Eds.), Handbook of Personality Theory and Research (Chicago: Rand-McNally, Inc., 1968), pp. 1130-1187.

9 Cf. Drew O. McDaniel, "Film's Presumed Advantages in Presenting Television News," Journalism Quarterly 50:146-149 (Spring 1973); Elliott A. McGinnies, "A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Printed Communication versus Spoken Communication in Persuasion," Journal of Psychology 60:1-8 (May 1965); Herman D. Goldberg, "Liking and Retention of a Simulcast," Public Opinion Quarterly 14:141-142 (Spring 1950).

10 Hower Hsia, "On Channel Effectiveness," Audio Visual Communication Review 16:245-267 (Fall 1968).

11 Bower, op. cit., p. 25.

12 Ibid., p. 49.

13 Roger Seasonwein and Leonard R. Sussman, "Can Extremists Using TV Move an Audience?" Journalism Quarterly 49:61-64, 78 (Spring 1972).

FIGURE 1

Attitude Change as a Function of General Media Evaluation and Medium used to Present Message

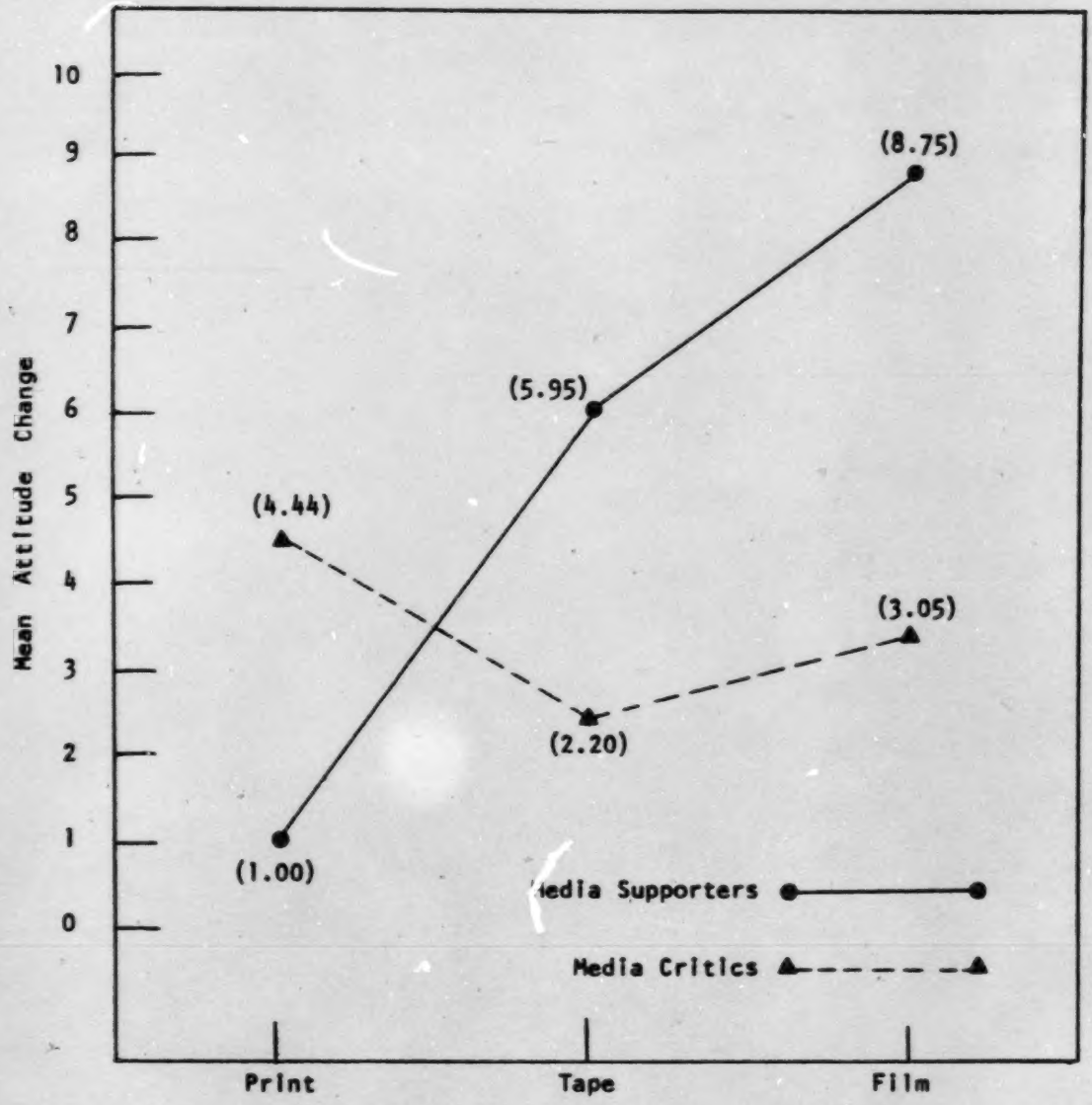

FIGURE 2

Message Evaluation Scores as a Function of General Media Evaluation and Medium used to Present Message